

Cold Hollow Cider Mill

My name is Paul Brown. My wife Gayle and I purchased the Cold Hollow Cider Mill in Waterbury Center on January 13, 2000, exactly 20 years ago.

Cold Hollow has been a Vermont institution since 1974. It was started by Eric and Francine Chittenden in Bakersfield, then moved into the existing Gibbs farm in Waterbury Center in 1976. Through the years it has grown into the multi-dimensional tourist-based business it is today. Many facets of the Mill are the same as they were when it first opened, and through the years, many new ones have been added.

In two words, the Cider Mill is a tourist attraction. It is a bricks and mortar educational and shopping experience. Everything we do involves educating people in where their food comes from and the process to make it. Many of our methods are quite old-fashioned, but sometimes those are the best way, and generally more interesting. Folks from all corners of the globe come to watch cider being made on an old-fashioned rack and cloth press; to see donuts made on vintage donut robots; and watch pies being made from scratch in our Bakery. The tourists check out our live beehive, sample several specialty foods, and buy unique clothing items.

Across the parking lot, in 2012 we first opened our luncheonette, hoping to retain Mill visitors for lunch. It is now open for breakfast and lunch and attracts a year-round local clientele as well as tourists. In 2015, we launched our first Hard Cider, Barn Dance, out of a newly renovated space. We have since expanded our tasting room and we now offer over seven taste profiles of our hard cider. We also have a beer store where people find Vermont microbrews, hard ciders, wines, and other unique beverages.

Cold Hollow has long been one of the largest producers of fresh apple cider in New England. We still are a supplier of large grocers such as Shaw's, Hannaford's, Price Chopper, and Costco. Several major distributors still do weekly pickups at the Mill. The growth of the hard cider category has allowed us to keep our production facility humming all year long supplying ourselves and other craft hard cider makers with the fresh cider required before fermentation.

Another small but growing division of our business is our Mail Order operation. Customers' desire to procure our products after leaving the state has fueled this, and we do several catalog mailings each year to help the growth.

Many of these aspects were not in place when my wife and I bought the Mill in January 2000. While it is undoubtedly the goal of any business to grow, some of our growth was by design and some by necessity. Through the years, we created and grew new aspects of the business, which has been great, but over the past five years or so we started to see an alarming trend.

While our revenue has gone up, there is more variety to our offerings at the Mill, our Marketing and Social Media presence has increased, but visitation has declined.

We do not charge an admission fee, or count people coming in the door, but we do track the number of transactions. Each transaction represents a party of visitors to the Mill. We are fortunate in that the dollars per transaction has gone up, as we have constantly up ticked the quality of our merchandise as well as the simple fact that things cost more.

But facts are facts: At the end of 2016, we had done 156,061 transactions. At the end of 2018, we had done 142,565 transactions. That's a 9% drop. And while 2019 came back up a bit, it is nowhere near the 2016 level.

Our business is strong, due in great part to the fact we have been here for 45 years. We are also a fairly unique entity, as there are not a lot of other businesses like ours. But we need to be clear on one thing: we are 100% dependent on tourists for existence. The Mill is doing well because we have diversified, continually refreshed our product offerings, and paid close attention to margins.

For years the prevailing belief was that in the northeast, Vermont owned the foliage business. I no longer believe that to be true. Increased competition from the Adirondacks, the White Mountains, and the seacoast of Maine is drawing potential visitors away from the Green mountains. If this trend continues, many smaller, tourism-based businesses may not be able to diversify, as we have, and may fall by the wayside. The same may hold true for other peripheral businesses that benefit from the tourism influx. Not to mention the tax revenue lost to the state.

Tourism is obviously a key component to the Vermont economy. It makes sense now more than ever for the state to invest in increased tourism marketing.